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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000373

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR PM ACTING A/S RUGGEIRO

IO ACTING A/S WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT

INL FOR A/S JOHNSON

DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY, KAHL, AND DALTON

USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

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TAGS: MCAP PBTS PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WE SHOULD MAINTAIN THE U.S. SUPPORT TO THE LEBANESE MILITARY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In all but the most pessimistic post-election scenarios, a robust program of U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) will serve to further our policy goals in Lebanon and the region. Without continued support, the LAF will be unable to address the challenges of terrorism, border control, and internal security. While we want the LAF to one day more aggressively confront sensitive issues, including Hezbollah's weapons, our assistance will also help enable longer-term political solutions that consolidate military and political authority in the hands of the government. We should view assistance to the LAF as a long-term, institution-building project and a means of countering terrorism in the region, not merely a political "reward" to a friendly government. The April 7-9 visit to Washington by GOL Defense Minister Elias Murr presents an opportunity to review our strategic cooperation with Lebanon.

¶2. (C) U.S. military assistance is linked to the LAF's five year modernization plan, which was developed with U.S. guidance and based upon two CENTCOM assessments of the LAF's needs. The modernization plan is intended to elevate the LAF into a more professional force focused on shared U.S. and Lebanese goals enshrined in UN Security Council resolution 1701: counterterrorism, border security, controlling Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps and Palestinian military bases, and preserving civil order.

¶3. (C) The LAF's battle against Fatah al-Islam militants in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in 2007 demonstrated both the utility and necessity of our assistance. Without our 41 plane-loads of emergency assistance, the LAF would have been unable to defeat the militants and take back the camp. Our assistance is targeted to address deficiencies in LAF training and equipment revealed during the Nahr al Barid fighting; LAF units that had received U.S. support performed markedly better. The battle also highlighted the disproportionate costs of "emergency" assistance in response to a crisis; a long-term institution-focused train and equip program could save money and lives in the event of another similar conflict.

¶4. (C) Downgrading our assistance would impede the implementation of UNSCR 1701. For example, our support to the LAF aids UNIFIL's mission in south Lebanon and helps maintain calm along Israel's northern border. After several rocket-launching incidents during and after the January 2009 conflict in Gaza, UNIFIL and the LAF increased their patrols, recognizing that even isolated incidents could trigger renewed hostilities with Israel. Without the vehicles, tactical surveillance drones, and high vision equipment we will be providing, the LAF would have a harder time monitoring UNIFIL's area of operations and deterring further rocket launches given its acute shortage of manpower. In addition, our continued assistance is necessary to improve border security and smuggling interdiction as called for by UNSCR 1701. If the LAF is to take on large-scale border security operations, we cannot afford to disrupt provision of vehicles and surveillance assets as well as secure communications gear.

¶5. (C) The LAF has an impeccable record of accountability for U.S.-origin equipment, including weapons and munitions, since the end of Lebanon's civil war in 1990. The LAF's track record indicates strong institutional discipline in supply logistics, as well as the efficacy of our end-use monitoring and accountability training programs. Furthermore, the LAF has followed through on commitments to destroy Man Portable Air Defense System (MANPADS) missiles in its depots. This was politically sensitive, as it opened the LAF to criticism that it was reducing its ability to defend Lebanon under pressure from the U.S. and others. From the commander to individual officers, the LAF understands the

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need to exercise strict control over its U.S.-origin assistance. We expect the LAF to continue to safeguard all U.S.-origin training and equipment.

¶6. (C) In addition to our support to the LAF, we have an \$80 million U.S. assistance program for the Internal Security Forces, aimed at strengthening the ISF so that it can fully assume traditional law enforcement duties and thereby lessen the LAF's involvement in policing. Currently, security responsibilities that would traditionally be carried out by police, such as crowd control, check points, and some criminal investigations often fall to the LAF. The program will train almost 10,000 ISF police members over four years. The program's goals include improving police skills, leadership, management, curriculum development and training. The U.S. is equipping units of the ISF with essential, non-lethal police equipment and vehicles needed to perform their duties as well as upgrading ISF training facilities, command centers and communications systems.

¶7. (C) Downgrading our support would negatively impact our relationships with senior Lebanese government leaders including President Michel Sleiman, Minister of Defense Elias Murr (who will be in Washington April 7-9), and LAF Commander General Jean Kahwagi. All are working to build the capacity of government institutions and curtail the influence of Hizballah and other militant groups. These leaders have taken political risks to strengthen ties with us, including by concluding a bilateral defense agreement at the first-ever U.S.-Lebanese Joint Military Commission (JMC) in October 2008. (Note: Additionally, as the LAF is led by a Christian in Lebanon's confessional system and has traditionally been viewed as a Christian-dominated institution, a reduction in assistance would strengthen opposition leader Michel Aoun's and Hizballah's message that Lebanese Christians cannot rely on the government to protect them. This could push critical Christian swing voters toward Aoun and his Hizballah-aligned, Syrian-backed bloc in future elections. Already Aoun is pointing to the new U.S. contact with Syria and Iran to argue that his approach of improved relations with them is being vindicated. End note.)

¶8. (C) Continued assistance will also strengthen the LAF as

a counterweight to Hizballah. To date, Hizballah and its allies have refrained from attacking our assistance, but have made known their discomfort with an increasingly capable LAF.

As the LAF grows stronger, Hizballah's claim that its arms are necessary to defend Lebanon will grow weaker.

19. (C) Continued backing of the LAF, whatever the electoral outcome and shape of the next government, will help us maintain influence over the sole government institution respected by all Lebanese and further our goal of de-politicizing government institutions more generally, an important step in consolidating the government's authority. At the same time, the embassy recognizes that USG skepticism in the event of an electoral victory by Hizballah and its allies may necessitate tactical shifts in the quality and quantity of our assistance. These shifts could include canceling the planned delivery of 56 additional M-60 tanks from Jordan (ten will already have been delivered), not sending a second Caravan (one will have been delivered); and reconsidering planned delivery of TOW launchers, 81 mm mortars and M4 rifles. However, we strongly recommend leaving the core elements of our train and equip program untouched. In addition to the senior-level USG policy discussions that will take place after the June 7 elections to assess Lebanon's future, the run-up to the October 2009 second meeting of the Joint Military Commission will provide an opportunity to review our assistance program and make adjustments as necessary.

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